

Family and Work

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Glass Ceiling? Or Is It Glass Mirror?

The press regularly decries the discrimination that women suffer in the workplace. To prove it, statistics are often thrown up about the number of female cents earned in the male dollar. Although there are undoubtedly pockets of discrimination, can the statistics show that it is widespread, or that it is systemic?

Commonly, these cents-in-a-dollar earnings simply combine all types of employment for all people of all ages and then compare average outcomes for men and women. Forgotten are the choices made by women and men—part-time or full-time work, geographical convenience to school or home, flexible hours, shift work, type of work, the desire (or lack of it) for responsibilities and commitment, ambition, etc.

The most critical influence on these choices, one so often ignored, is that around 70 per cent of all Australian women favour looking after their children and family rather than working. If we simply compare full-time work, for instance, men work longer hours than do women.

Without children in the background, a recent American study showed that for young graduate women who have never had a child, their earnings approach 98 per cent of men's. In another study, older, childless women were as successful, performed as well and earned as much as men on the corporate ladder. In other words, the difference had less to do with sex than with having children.

In May, the results of an annual salary survey by the Australian Institute of Management appeared with the headline, 'Female pay scales

fail to keep up'. Senate Democrat leader Meg Lees said that it was a national disgrace. The Chief Executive of the Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency, Fiona Krautil, thought it a shocking finding.

This latest survey claimed that a salary gap had been found between men and women in the same job. It was the first time in the 36-year history of the AIM's annual survey that

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men's and women's wages had been directly compared, and it was found that, in some cases, women were paid 50 per cent of male wages for the same work.

Now, as it is illegal in Australia to discriminate on pay rates for the same job, either something is funny about the research or thousands of employers are flagrantly breaking the law.

Sure enough, a closer inspection of the data reveals that 'the same job' really only means the same title given to a job. So, accountants or administration managers for BHP or Qantas are, in this study, indistinguishable from their counterparts in a suburban supermarket. Forget about how people commonly work

up the corporate ladder by moving from job to job in bigger or more prestigious companies, with more responsibilities, bigger budgets and, of course, higher salaries, and forget about seniority or any other variable. The AIM study clearly makes a mockery of market realities because of a muddled notion of comparable worth, based presumably on perceived injustices of the past.

The only sensible question to be asked in all of this—which nobody has ever attempted—is just what level of participation and earning by women is reasonable, now, or in the future? The best analysis done in Australia even to hint at an answer came two years ago by Ian Dobson as policy adviser in the Vice-Chancellor's Office at Monash University. Dobson demonstrated that if we allowed for the extreme (and impossible) case where every new university position was filled by a woman, it would still take ten to fourteen years for a 50/50 result. Even on a rugged, socially engineered 'your turn, my turn' basis, it would take several decades. Given that women with children choose not to participate equally in the workforce, however, one can hardly expect equal outcomes—ever.

Could it not be thought, in present day Australia, that the so-called glass ceiling is really a glass mirror? Some women, when looking up, see themselves reflected in it. Equal opportunity and a society free from sex discrimination are obvious, necessary and good things. A dogged belief in equal outcomes is ultimately profoundly reactionary and patronizing.

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